

Feminist Parenthood Column
Edited by the Feminist Parenthood Committee

Reproduction and Redemption: Motherhood and Religion

By Hannah Schweitzer, MA, LPC
Clinical Psychology PhD Student, Fielding Graduate University



Although I was raised religious, I did not consider my environment to overlap with fundamentalism until I was engaged to be married. I characterize my upbringing with statements such as “I was allowed to wear pants and go to college but couldn’t watch Harry Potter or play with Pokemon cards.” These experiences tend to differentiate me from more conservative religious examples, such as the Duggar family of TLC’s *19 Kids and Counting* fame.

I was engaged at a “normal” time for my religious undergraduate cohort. It was the spring of my junior year at age 19. I suddenly faced judgmental questions from my religious classmates, such as why I was planning to work if I was going to get married. This led to even more arguments about the evils of psychology as a field. Or, why the unregulated and unlicensed field of biblical counseling was the only correct answer for my future career. Of course I also received questions about when I was planning on having children. The answer of “Maybe after I get my doctorate” led to the question “Well, why are you getting married if you’re not immediately planning on having children?” I was told that not wanting children is a sin since the first commandment in the bible is to, “Be fruitful and multiply.”

Even my own father, who had encouraged me to have a career and know how to take care of myself, talked about how I was moving from his “umbrella of protection and authority” to be under my future husband’s umbrella. I later learned this metaphor was created by the Institute of Basic Life Principles founder Bill Gothard, who graduated from the same religious college I attended. He was later asked to step down from his position of leadership following accusations of sexual harassment by 34 individuals, many of whom were minors (Bailey, 2014). Gothard was a proponent of homeschooling and courtship, discouraging dating, syncopated music, and Cabbage Patch dolls for being idolatrous and vessels for demons. To this day, I am unsure how his umbrella teaching leaked over into my evangelical environment.

The idea of marriage for the purpose of procreation traces back to St. Augustine in the late fourth century, who eschewed mutually desired non-procreative sex between married individuals as sinful on nearly the same level as adultery (Richie et al., 2014). While this theology has been filtered over time, AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) individuals within religious communities continue to receive the message that their ultimate emotional fulfillment, or even spiritual redemption, can only come through bearing children. This messaging can be subtle, such as in the churches I grew up where only women were allowed to serve as nursery workers. The messaging could also be more blatant, such as the recent move by the Southern Baptist Convention to officially bar women from holding positions of leadership (Dias & Graham, 2023).

Within the field of psychology we are not immune from these traditional gender expectations. In the past, operational definitions of family required the presence of biological or adopted children to differentiate them from childless married couples, which were not seen as a familial unit (Gold, 2013). Over time, our understanding of what comprises a family has changed to non-traditional family structures. However, it appears that an inherent association remains between childbearing and moral and religious values. A 2008 study by Agrillo and Nelini found that “adjectives such as self-absorbed, selfish, unmanly or unwomanly, immoral, incomplete, unloving, irresponsible, immature, too career oriented, or child-haters are applied to” childless people, while individuals with children were seen as self-sacrificial, mature, altruistic, and others-oriented. Demographics in this study indicated that childless individuals were less religious, less politically conservative, and had less strict adherence to gender roles than those with children, potentially showing correlation between religion and childbearing.

Our psychotherapy clients do not have to be raised in cults or high-control groups to feel lasting negative psychological impacts of religiosity on reproductive decisions, such as being told that their personal reproductive choices are a matter of public discussion and hold eternal consequences for their souls. Like myself, they may have attended public high school, but have been excused to do independent study in the library during biology units on sexual education or evolution. Or, they have worn jeans (that had to be baggy and paired with an oversized t shirt to not be a “lustful stumbling block” for men). The decision to not have children appears to carry weight and judgment even in secular communities. Though clients like myself with a history of conservative religious backgrounds may struggle to untangle the extra weight of theological implications attached to this choice. I have learned from my own experience that these women may require extra time to recognize the ability to be a complete human outside of reproduction, or to step out under their own umbrella.

If you would like to submit to the Feminist Parenthood Column please email Lauren Mizock, PhD at lmizock@fielding.edu.

References

- Agrillo C., Nelini C. (2008). Childfree by choice: A review. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25, 347–363.
- Bailey, S. (2014, March 7). "[Conservative leader Bill Gothard resigns following abuse](#)"

allegations." *Washington Post*.p

Dias, E & Graham, R. (2023, June 16). Southern Baptists' Fight Over Female Leaders Shows Power of Insurgent Right. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/16/us/southern-baptist-women-pastors-church.html>

Gold, J. M. (2013). The experiences of childfree and childless couples in a pronatalistic society: Implications for family counselors. *The Family Journal (Alexandria, Va.)*, 21(2), 223-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480712468264>

Richie, C. (2014). The augustinian legacy of the procreative marriage: Contemporary implications and alternatives. *Feminist Theology*, 23(1), 18-36.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735014542376>